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The Polygraphers Are Still Dreaming

Ray Weir, once boss polygrapher for the CIA and now in private practice, deplors The Post's distrust of the lie detector ["Damnable Lies About the Polygraph," Free for All, Dec. 10] and advocates a society in which journalists would be required to submit to polygraph tests administered, in The Post's case at least, by himself.

Many of Weir's colleagues dream of a day soon when they may be unleashed to weed out all the undesirables among us. In April, by presidential directive, millions of federal employees (and others) will have to submit to polygraph tests on demand or face "adverse consequences." This is Hobson's choice indeed, since submitting to the lie detector is not only humiliating and stressful, perhaps the ultimate invasion of privacy, but it is also dangerous. The evidence we now have of the accuracy of polygraph tests in the field indicates not only that they are wrong about one-third of the time overall but, worse, that they are biased against the truthful person who, if he happens to be the only suspect tested, may have nearly a 50-50 chance of being misclassified as "deceptive."

The polygraph is especially dangerous to the more highly socialized among us, the conscientious, the scrupulous, the deeply religious. West Point alumni, with their tradition of the Honor Code, seem especially vulnerable. John Tillson, decorated for gallantry in Vietnam, failed a polygraph at the Pentagon in 1982; only the evidence of a Post reporter that the polygraph was lying, and not Tillson, prevented the ruin of his career. Maj. Peter Cecere, a Soviet specialist and Russian translator on the hot line to Moscow, was given a routine polygraph test last year, and he also was betrayed by his West Point scrupulosity and was tipped into a Kafkaesque nightmare of groundless suspicion. His 15 years of training and experience, in which we taxpayers had invested at least \$1 million, hung in the balance for months while investigators sought—in vain—for actual evidence of wrongdoing. A Delaware priest failed to convince a polygrapher that he was truthful in denying a series of armed robberies and was halfway through a criminal trial before the real "gentleman bandit," a look-alike, came forward and confessed. I have been personally involved in the cases of three men, each convicted of separate murders on the basis of polygraph evidence, each of whom was subsequently exonerated.

In an article for the trade journal *Polygraph*, Weir asserts, "I have never seen an authenticated case of a 'false-positive' [truthful person failing the lie detector] presented yet." We are dealing here with invincible ignorance, with eyes that will not see.

Polygraph "evidence" has been ruled inadmissible in criminal trials by the supreme courts of 24 states and, in California, by a statute passed in 1983. Yet

Weir is sadly right in asserting that polygraph results are frequently admitted into evidence in other jurisdictions and, even where they are excluded from the courtroom proper, many prosecutors permit polygraphers to decide who will be prosecuted and who set free. Most scandalous of all, perhaps, is the practice of requiring rape victims—already traumatized enough, one would have thought—to submit to the lie detector before the police will take their complaints seriously.

Congress' Office of Technology Assessment, in its just-published survey of the topic, concluded that the polygraph detects fear rather than lying; a lot of fear is going around these days, and the polygraphers are licking their chops. The attitude at KGB headquarters, one suspects, is not fear but jubilation. The KGB knows that a polygraph can be beaten by a trained agent, and such is the present dependence of our security agencies on this mythological shield that the ability to beat the lie detector is almost an open sesame to the trove of American secrets.

—David T. Lykken

The writer, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Minnesota Medical School, is the author of "A Tremor in the Blood: Uses and Abuses of the Lie Detector."